The Colonial Familiar Nostalgic Radical Transformative Life of the Strawberry

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HumDrumPress

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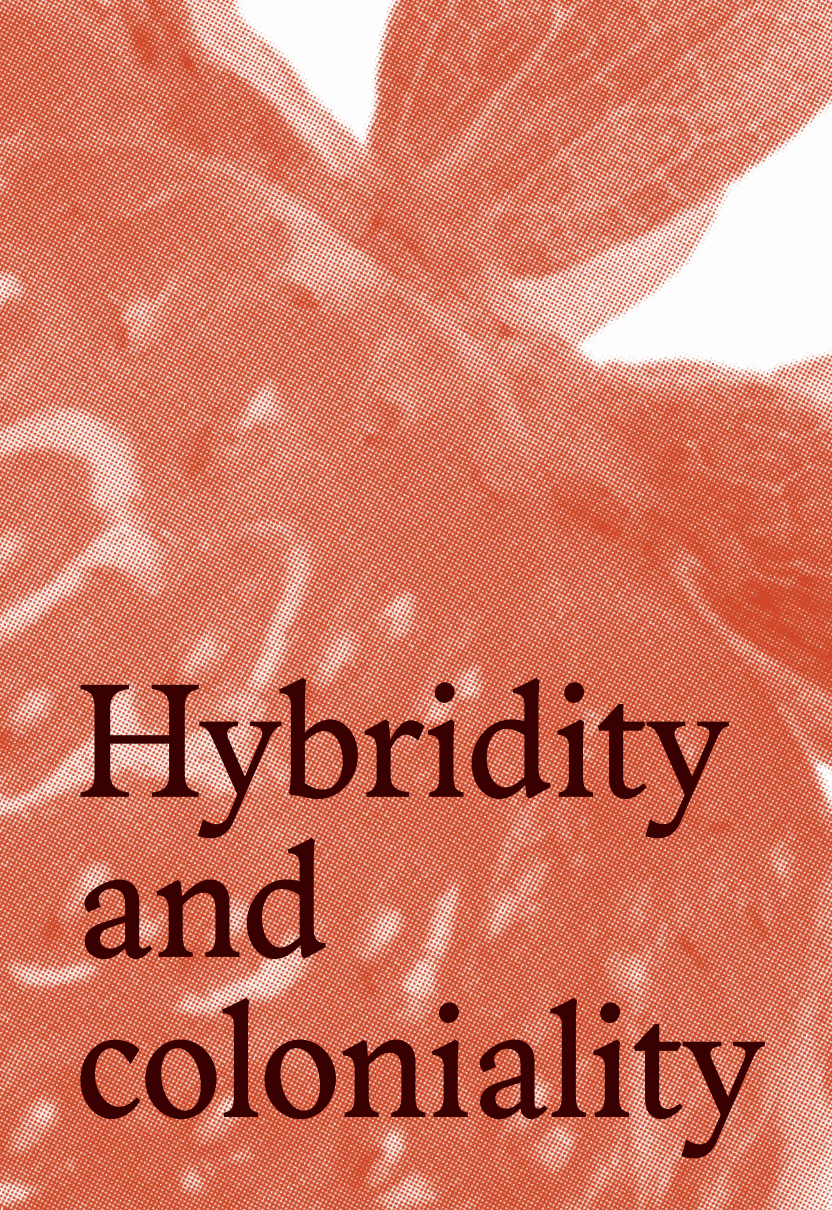
Intro-duction


Hybridity
and
coloniality

What we know today as the Fragaria Ananassa, or, more infamously, the common strawberry, is a hybrid of two plant varieties picked from a garden in Brittany sometime in the 1750s. Side-by-side, its parent fruits acted as souvenirs collected by colonisers who hoped to bring the taste of the new world back to the old. Thus, the strawberry's parents are the Fragaria Virginia and the Fragaria Chiloensis.

As a form of interruption, which I do often in my own thoughts and writing, I feel that I should mention when using the term 'colonial' here to refer to a certain history and the existence of strawberries today, I am making a nod to the word's roots. Colonisation is derived from the Latin words colere (meaning to cultivate), colonia (meaning an estate of land, or farm) and colonus (the tiller of the soil, the farmer). Given these etymological roots, one can frame the expanses of industrial agriculture as another form of colonial exploitation. It is with this lens that I choose to see the readily available strawberry as a seed for this story. One can also look back at the beginnings of the familiar variety of garden strawberry to see its colonial

ties, taken from far away lands and planted in gardens in France where it was hybridised by chance into the Fragaria Ananassa, the common strawberry, we readily see in stores today.

The Fragaria Virginia, also known as the wild strawberry, grows untamed throughout present-day Canada and the United States. The plant was brought back to France from French colonies "surveying"[1] present-day North America. This strawberry is what Robin Wall Kimmerer refers to in *The Gift of Strawberries*,[2] as a sweet, wild-grown berry. Smaller in size, many like to link the size of the strawberry to its sweetness, imagining that the smaller the fruit, the sweeter the taste.

Layered onto this epoch is the term: Plantationocene,[3] made popular by theorist Donna Haraway, from which a view of history can be made of Earth's geology shifting with the advent of the plantation. With the introduction of mass industrialization of nature, planetary beings became further abstracted into commodities: land and human labour quantified and sublimated into production. This abstraction continues today as the distances between the farms growing vegetables and fruit stretch greater and greater distances from their points of sale: supermarket shelves, spanning between North and South,

national and international. In using Plantationocene to describe this era of ecological transformation, I am directly pointing to the distinct element of racist capital involved. Through the physical 'planting' of African peoples during the settlement of America, and the transformation of land into capital vis-à-vis the logistics of enforced agriculture on terra nullius, the Plantationocene was (and is, still, in contemporary colonial contexts today) created through the forced movement and exploitation of nature and person. In the case of the strawberry, the Plantationocene becomes present with the migrant workers who make up most of the pickers in industrial strawberry fields in the Global North today.

The Fragaria Chiloensis, also known as the beach strawberry, Chilean strawberry, or coastal strawberry, was picked by Amedee-Francois Frezier in 1714, a French military engineer, mathematician, and spy. His time in Chile was spent under the disguise of a merchant captain, sent to sketch Spanish ports to spy on the strength of Spain's colonies in order to help the French strategize modes of attack. While there, he spent time investigating the flora and fauna of the region, making drawings of his encounters and bringing back cuttings. It was in this journey that he encountered the Fragaria Chiloensis.

Big, heart-shaped, and pale in colour, he brought back with him seedlings that would become cultivated upon his return.

This combination was, by chance, not premeditated. The strawberry varieties, Chiloensis and Virginia, had been grown side by side in a garden in Brittany, pollinating one another, and eventually becoming runners, intertwining and twirling around each other. A new strawberry was thus born, one with bigger, more hardy fruits, bursting in sweetness. Their hybridization is what led to the basis of all strawberries produced commercially today.

> Finding the shape of story, amongst the sweet joys of the fruit, lay the many invisibilized labours of others. Most often women, most often far away from their homes, are there to participate in seasonal work. The presence of the hands that pick our fruits has become increasingly removed from our consciousness as consumers. Picking up a plastic crate at our local supermarket, the berry's country of origin is listed, but nothing of the hands that pick them.

This story of the strawberry is troubled. Troubled because of what becomes uncovered and shared, but also troubled through my own role as a writer. I am not a historian, nor a food scientist, nor an anthropologist. To place myself within a particular identity, specifically in relation to place and purpose—when both are often in constant shift—is a privilege. I therefore prefer to identify as someone with questions. This book is

an attempt for me to unpack these questions and reveal all the little threads that tie the here and now to all the there's and then's.

My subject of questioning is that of the strawberry, initially because of its constant, year-round availability, but, as I began to pull at the threads in its story, further because it began to reveal a much larger web of nostalgia and consequence.

Around the same time as my growing obsession began, I moved away from my home in Canada to live and study in the Netherlands. Living in the Netherlands, one becomes acutely aware of the ways nature is planned and plotted. Unlike Canada, a country torn into by settler imagination, the Dutch drained sections of shallow sea to make land, and planted upon it as they saw fit. Flying above the country, a first impression is made by how gridded the landscape is. Land is measured and sliced into pieces with logic and precision. There is no "waste".[4]

Returning to the strawberries, I was once visiting a friend in Vilnius, in the middle of November, with cold, short days upon us and the ground shimmering from frost. We went to a local supermarket where we found strawberries for sale at €2.75. My question: in whose garden could these have possibly been grown? When farms nearby had layers of frost on top of cold hard ground, the nearest place with sun and warm enough conditions could only be thousands of kilometres away. This harshness kicked my research ass into gear and I began my hunt to trace the strawberry. This hunt helped to foster conversations with many others who, too, had often reflected and recalled memories of their childhoods. Memories connected to picking strawberries in the wild or producing recipes to be enjoyed during the sweet, summer months. I noticed that these recurring memories gave way to nostalgic memories of land—of a reciprocity with nature.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's text *The Gift of Strawberries* speaks of this gift with the same love.[5] She writes of the strawberry as a gift from nature—*oh for me, you shouldn't have...*—this gift is one of the ways we are first taught to relate to land. Which leads me to question, when does this shift from a relationship of reciprocity to a relationship with an abstract commodity take place?

This book will try to complicate this relationship. Through the course of its pages, I won't be asking you to stop eating strawberries. Instead I ask for a collective resistance to structures that violate land and person.

Growing Space: Another Harvest

In summer 2022, I shared fragments of my strawberry research at an exhibition space called Growing Space. The space, a glass greenhouse, was built in the neighbourhood of Wielewaal in Rotterdam, a neighbourhood initially built as a response to lack of housing post WW2 bombing of the city. Due to a new demand for housing, the municipality is currently in the process of demolishing the area to build new housing complexes. The exhibiting space, Growing Space, is (or was, as it is now demonlished as of October 23) a glass greenhouse that was build in the summer of 2020. The greenhouse was made to provide exhibition space to artists during the strict confines of the covid-19 restrictions. I was hosted in the space, long after covid rules controlled life in the Netherlands, gathering and sharing space together thus became a part of the work. Sitting on giant strawberry cushions, I asked people for their strawberry stories.

Another Harvest installed at Growing Space Wielewaal (Rotterdam, NL, 2023)

and I spoke about her garden,
how she always seems to be learning
from it, tuning in to a 'garden time'
and thinking about how to respond
to the needs of the ecosystem.
She told me a story about how
her mother witnessed the birth of
an animal and since then hasn't been able
to eat strawberry jam because
the similarity between afterbirth and
strawberry jam was too much for her
(with this, I think of classic gore
films that would be made in black and
white. Often when squished
liquids began secreting, chocolate
syrup had been used to mimic blood
because the colour didn't matter).

Fire Season: Climate, Robots, and Workers

It's late August, I'm visiting a friend's family home, taking regular dips in the sea and matching the pace of her 92 year old grandmother; slow lunches, siestas, lots of resting in the 31C heat, and expressing the joys of soft breezes coming in from the seaside. One morning, I wake to distressing messages in my family WhatsApp group chat. Most of the messages have been shared while I was sleeping because of the 9 hour time difference. I witness images of fire along the west side of my family's city. A picture from my mother's friend shows the cascading flames trailing downwards on a hillside. News from my mom that the

WhatsApp image sent from my mother of the wildfires in Kelowna (Kelowna, CA, 2023)

fire jumped Lake Okanagan and was now in the northern end of the city. Close enough to see from our backyard, the bright red fires shoot upwards into the sky, and black smoke clouds everything else. My mother tells me she has packed an emergency kit in case their area is next to be evacuated. She tells me what's most important is our family pictures, she's already loaded those into the garage beside the car.

Fires are not uncommon in summertime Canada. They're regular, they're necessary. They help to regenerate the forest, getting rid of all the dry patches in the woods and preparing the soils for new life. Fires that hit cities and grow to thousands of square kilometres, being blown by wind across cities and demolishing homes? This is not normal. Before settlers took control of the land, burns were regular. But with the development and settlement of land, fires were forcibly controlled, being put out as soon as possible. Growing up, I remember fire prevention training being shared with kids in schools prior to camping seasons. With the aid of Smokey the bear, mascots teach lessons of fire safety and fire prevention to kids.
The best way to deal with a forest fire is to stop it from starting in the first place. As the summers grow hotter and more dry, there's not much that can be done in terms of prevention anymore. The only option becomes to wait it out, leave if you have to, and get out of the way of its flames until it's over.

The city my family lives in is called Kelowna. It's a part of a region called the Okanagan, a region known for its orchards and wines, fresh fruits in the summer. There's many farms scattered around the region boasting about their produce, and plenty of strawberries to be picked. In the summer, many farms host U-pick scenarios where people, families, friends, and tourists come to pick their own berries, thus doing the work themselves and getting a deal on the sweet summer fruits.

I think about these farms now in the fire. What has happened to their livelihoods? If their farms have not been caught in a blaze, how have the strawberries survived this thick cloud of smoke that envelops the rest of the city? How are the workers that need to go out to tend to the farm?

I search for answers but I am not able to find anything. The disasters are still impending, the fire is still burning in the region.

In searching for answers on these smoky strawberry farms, I instead found a news article about a man running a strawberry farm in Chilliwack, a nearby town, that tested out robotic strawberry pickers with a robotics company.[8] The company, Neupeak, is in its trial stages of developing a machine able to pick strawberries with the same careful ease as those of human hands. Their website shows little robots zooming horizontally across the screen, making their way along elevated strawberry plants. A two-pronged robot hand reaches out and plucks the strawberry hanging from the stem, using a camera to recognize the red ripeness of the fruit, being careful to grab it without crushing it. The whole process takes nearly 5 seconds

as one strawberry is picked
and is placed in a container—
but the video continues on,
showing that the robots can
work at any level for picking,
at any time of day or night.

Watching these robots picking the strawberries, I'm reminded of an episode of a Dutch tv show, Keuringsdienst van Waarde,[7] on the production of supermarket strawberries. The show was questioning why strawberries don't taste as good as we remember, repeatedly asking why the supermarket strawberries are not as sweet. In it, they interview two farmers, one from a greenhouse producer, one from a farm. The second farmer mentioned time and again that the strawberries need the earth: "aardbei!" The "aard" in the Dutch word aardbei translates to "earth", therefore, the logic is that it is an "earth berry". While he explains that strawberries must come from the earth, the camera pans to women picking the berries, kneeling down in the soil to find the red berries hidden under leaves. The interviewer attempts to ask a

question to one of the workers,
the worker smiles back at him
saying nothing. The farmer says
that they don't speak Dutch,
they're Polish workers. He follows
this by saying, "you won't be
finding any Dutch people working
on their knees anymore."

It is somewhere in these cross hairs of burning lands and exploited hands and labour that I begin to question why *productivity* is so highly valued?[8] Can we somehow begin to imagine a future in which we can live with the encounter of the strawberry alone being enough—rather than relying on its rampant and constant production? Can the strawberry return to being a gift as opposed to a mass-produced commodity?[9]

told me about an incident in
Greece in 2013 where the workers were
being withheld from their earnings.
They responded by striking, and the
farmers responded by shooting at them.
30 workers were injured, most of
which were migrant workers from
Bangladesh, working without proper
documentation. The incident made head-
line news and started a boycott
in Europe to the strawberries
grown from the region, claiming the
fruit as "blood strawberries".[10]

When I first began making this book, I thought about the multiple intersections that happen between person and fruit. Aware that this relationship had many complicated instances of

labour extraction involved within it, I sought out the help of someone more knowledgeable. A friend of a dear friend, and a parallel researcher of strawberry labour, Patricia Diz Neira felt like the right person to reach out to. Patricia is a feminist researcher based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and specialises in psychosocial intervention in migrants and social minorities with a strong background in therapy with vulnerable groups. I asked her to share her findings related to all things strawberries...

1 In mentioning "surveying" in quotations, I'd like to acknowledge the ways that language paints a perspective of the stories we are told. To say that a land was "surveyed" means that the area was being plotted and prepared. This act of surveying was often erasing the occupants that were already living there. It is with this nod to language that I wish to point to Max Liborion's work of footnoting in *Pollution is Colonialism*, which actively notes the languages used in history and academia that still evade colonialism's violent pasts and presents. Liboiron, Max. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

2 Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Penguin Ecology. London: Penguin Books, 2020.

3 Edwards, Justin D., Rune Graulund, and Johan Anders Höglund, eds. *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022.

4 In the logic of colonialism, land that is not seen as "productive" was considered to be a waste. The waste was therefore land for the taking. When settlers came to Canada, this logic was used to take up large parts of land to reconstruct the values of the settlers. This meant lakes were drained for use of farm lands, mountains carved into to make way for railroads etc.

5 ibid.

6 https://www.neupeak.com/ (online. Accessed 2023.)

7 From KRO-NCRV network, NL. Title translates to Inspection Service of Value. Aired June 2020. Accessed 2023.

8 "[L]and that was not cultivated for the purposes of contributing to a burgeoning agrarian capitalist economy by industrious labourers was...deemed to be of waste". Bhandar states that the unproductive land is *wasteful*. That since settlers have taken land, it must be put to use otherwise it is considered to be something wasteful, and further, to be made productive. But why is anything not contributing to capitalist economy a waste? Bhandar, Brenna. *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*. Global and Insurgent Legalities. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

9 Ibid. Kimmerer.

10 This is not the only sinister nickname given to the fruit. Other names such as "rojo oro" (red gold) and devil's fruit have been used by workers to denote the forms of pain inflicted by the strawberry's production.

The (ir)

reversible

strawberry

Written by Patricia Diz Neira

The (ir)reversible strawberry describes the strawberry production system in Huelva (south of Spain) and the consequences it has on working conditions and the environment, highlighting the union activism of Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha (JHL) and inviting consumers of this fruit to be more responsible regarding their purchasing decisions. It offers a political analysis from a gender perspective of the syndicalist activism of JHL, and a critical, anticapitalist, and environmentalist overview of the strawberry production in Spain. It is with a partial and fragmented view that I make this analysis, drawing upon the methodological perspective from which we talk about our objects of study from a specific theoretical and political perspective. This offers a vision linked to a specific context and subjectivity.[1] Divided into a Play of Five Acts, we will walk from the image we may currently have as consumers of strawberries, to the reality of how this valued friend is produced. Each act will represent a different actor that plays an active role in this process.

Act I is a brief introduction into the pre-imposed ideas we have about the strawberry in society; presenting, at the same time, critical questions related to the production and the importance that the symbolism of the product has on our habits of consumption. Act II introduces the main characters involved in the production of this product and how the Andalusian agricultural system works. This explanation reveals the labour issues that affect the agriculture day workers, exposing how these problems are entangled in discriminative mechanisms of class, gender, and race. Act III uncovers another main character in this

reality, the environment and the impact that agriculture has on it. Act IV introduces the organisation, *Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha*. This organisation, born in 2018 as a response to discriminative working practices, is the result of the abandonment of the agriculture workers by the public administration and the big trade unions (UGT and CCOO). Acknowledging the characteristics of these 'self-made' trade unionists, the reader can understand the need for these women to emerge as political subjects[2] and fight for their working rights. This contextualization enables a better comprehension of the discourse and practice surrounding these syndicalist activists and their context. Act V invites us to think about our participation in the so-called consumption system, reminding us that we are actively implicated in this issue.

Act I. The introduction.

I would like to begin by talking about the strawberry, and the meaning this product has taken on both in the market and for its consumers. The strawberry is a soft, sweet, tasty, red fruit that has been consumed since 200 B.C., as Roman texts prove. During that period, the strawberry was already highly appreciated because of its taste, color and medicinal benefits. Nowadays, in Huelva it is called 'red gold' due to the importance this small fruit has for the economy of the province.

If we think about strawberries and their symbolism, we can all recall a vivid red heart, a passionate love, fantasy worlds, cute little dolls, and much, much more. Through history, this small fruit has been used

in stories, literature, and art. It is a symbol of passion, purity, and health. For instance, Romans believed strawberries were a symbol of Venus, goddess of love, because of their heart-shape and red colour. In Shakespeare's play, Othello gives Desdemona, as a first gift, a strawberry printed handkerchief as proof of his love for her. Additionally, related to passion, strawberries with champagne are considered an aphrodisiac. These are just a few stories, and myths related to and inspired by this fruit.

We can also highlight the extraordinary health and culinary properties of the strawberry. Strawberries symbolise the birth of spring, succeeding wintertime, and accompanying us until the end of June.[3] The sweetness of the flavour is a metaphor of the sweetness of life and its properties are an example of health. Strawberries are an excellent source of vitamin C, vitamin K, folic acid, potassium, iron and magnesium, and we cannot forget are really versatile in gastronomy since we can eat them alone, with cream or yoghurt, sauces and syrups, dips and salsas, baked goods, smoothies, jams, salads, etc. All these properties alongside its value in popular culture makes this fruit the best of the berries and, without doubt, one of the most popular spring and summer products.

Why am I bringing up all these images, ideas, and experiences of strawberries? Because it is important to know that we generate abstract images related to products and this symbolic value has influence on consumption decisions. The problem lies in that these images show only a part of the product, and sometimes only a distorted or partial view. They do not contain complete information, especially related to the

production of the product itself. As consumers, we cannot guess what is behind a product; therefore, we require more information about the sustainability and working rights of its production to make more responsible choices.

For instance, related to strawberry production, it is a fact that Spain has become the second largest producer of strawberries in the world during the last decades. But why and how has this change in production happened? How does this impact the production system? Who are the workers that collect the fruit in the fields? Do the production chains and the commercialisation of the strawberry reject slave labour and protect the rights of workers, their families, and communities? Do the agricultural producers and the companies involved fulfil a fair mechanism of production by being honest, eschewing fraudulent practices, and obeying the law? Are the production processes environmentally sustainable?

Act II. The context: The intensive agriculture in Huelva (Andalusia).

"Without a doubt, you cannot forget the Huelva countryside once you have visited it. The first impression of sub-Saharan and North African settlements, the overcrowded houses of the day labourers, the stories of the Romanian seasonal workers denouncing the harassment inflicted by the employer. [...] Everything gives an unavoidable sensation of disaster.

Shanty settlement in Lepe, Huelva (Marcos Moreno, El Español, 2022)

But nothing could be further from the truth, everything is designed and structured so what is important, production and money, continue forward. The rest doesn't matter."

(La fresa amarga,[4] 2004).

Agriculture is one of the most important engines of the Andalusian economy, however many social and environmental problems may also mark it. During the last decades, Andalusia has become the largest exporter of vegetables and berries in Europe. Specifically, the province of Huelva is famous for producing red fruits, being the largest exporter of this product to Europe and the second largest worldwide. In order to produce on such a large scale, the region employs[5] intensive farming techniques, including a substantial number of underground aquifers. Moreover, the climate of the region naturally favours its production. These characteristics allow Huelva to be highly competitive in the international market. This system based on over-exploitation not only has consequences for the environment but also hangs over the entire agricultural production system, especially the workers who collect the product.

The last decades of Andalusian agriculture[6] have been under the influence of globalisation, which has resulted in numerous changes in the sector. Among those changes, Andalusian agriculture has experienced an increasing disconnection with the (local) agro-food industry and a growth in its international exports. These changes made farmers lose power in the sector, favouring large agro-food companies and the fluctuation of their prices. Under these

Aerial view of a farm taken by the CR Palos drone (2019)

circumstances[7] farmers are under tremendous economic pressure; although many agricultural entrepreneurs continue to make profit. To survive under these circumstances, farmers have increased the production per hectare and reduced labour costs. These changes have harmed the environment and have created a situation where workers carry out their jobs in the context of high productivity and low salary remuneration, among other irregularities.

Within this globalised context, the sector is nourished by foreign workers because it does not have enough national workforce to carry out the harvest of the red fruits. Most of the foreign workers are coming from Eastern Europe, Africa and, to a lesser extent, South America. Many of them, due to situations of vulnerability and discrimination,[8] are forced to accept fewer working rights than local workers, as well as poorer living conditions.[9] Many of these workers are undocumented or subjected to contracts based on circular migration that are designed to exploit them. Especially gruesome is the case of women day labourers who harvest strawberries and face labour and sexual exploitation.

For instance, Spain and Morocco have an agreement to hire workers in Morocco to come to work in Spain. However, this hiring process obeys a sexist logic in which only Moroccan women (and no men) are hired since it is considered that women are more obedient and submissive.[10] Furthermore, it is a requirement that these women must come from rural environments, be married, divorced, or widowed (but not single), and have underage children. Under these hiring

Houses of women day workers in Huelva (La mar de Onuba, 2020)

conditions, companies are looking for workers who are not combative, work hard, and can be easily forced to return to their countries of origin. Companies and farmers benefit from the vulnerability of these people. When these women arrive into Spain, their working contracts are not respected, their lack of knowledge of the culture and the language, and the fact they are usually living in places far from towns and cities, prevents them from reporting and defending their rights.[11] Therefore, the life[12] and working conditions that these women are submitted to, condemn them to extreme vulnerability and social exclusion.[13] Ana Pinto and Najat Bassit, ex-seasonal workers and founders of Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha (JHL), an organisation that fights for the rights of agriculture workers, explain:

"It's always the same problem, these women sign a contract in Morocco through the local employment agency, without really being told anything. Once in Spain, the employers make them sign another one with completely different conditions, which does not respect the agreement signed between the two countries".

(euromedrights, 2022)

The truth is that with or without papers, these migrants gather in makeshift camps or in overcrowded houses,[14] without drinking water or care, and remain under unsafe and insalubrious situations, at the mercy of fires and assaults (especially in the makeshift settlements), and of unscrupulous employers.

Moroccan workers, Huelva (Laura Martínez Valero / Women's Link Worldwide, La mar de Onuba, 2020)

"I came with a contract to collect strawberries.
And think to stay here in Huelva to change my life.
I only worked with a contract for a month
and then stay here. My money was finished,
and where to go? Where to come...?
Nobody knows. We are without job, without drinks,
without food, without anything (...)
Where do I have to look for job?
Everyone wants to take advantage.
Somebody wants to make love with you,
somebody wants you to work more hours
but without paying.
Each person wants to take advantage of people."

(Fatiha Suleman, conferences of "The Syndicalist Feminism to Come", Reina Sofía Museum, 2021)

This is the testimony of Fatiha Suleman,[15] a Moroccan day labourer, who decided to stay in Huelva without papers to find a better life for herself and her family. Despite her precarious situation, she decided to talk about what is happening in the strawberry fields and report it in order to push for a change. She is also a member of the Jonaleras de Huelva en Lucha.

From a labour context that is utterly precarious, feminised,[16] and marked by segmentation based on the place of origin of workers, the working issues that the agricultural labour force encounter develop within a complex net of inclusion and exclusion based on discriminatory systems such as gender, class, and race. The precarious situation in which these workers find themselves invites us to consider whether what we are dealing with here are field workers or modern slaves.

Act III. The environment. The fight for the preservation of Doñana park, the biggest wetland in Europe.

"In our fight, we cannot only focus on working rights. We need to check how everything else works. Because in the end, it is not useful to gain working rights if here, in these towns, we won't have water to drink. If they are going to finish with the lung of the region, Doñana"

(Ana Pinto, Carne Cruda podcast, 2023)

Another important element that plays a huge role in this production system is the environment. In a province such as Huelva[17] that naturally suffers from water restrictions every summer, the overproduction of red fruits endangers the future not only of the local ecosystem but also of agricultural production in itself. To understand the magnitude of the problem, it is necessary to analyse how the production of this fruit has expanded in recent decades.

Huelva has experienced the greatest growth worldwide in strawberry production during the last decades. An early-century report of the Regional Government of Andalusia shows how this province has gone from producing 6,500 tons of strawberries in the 1960s to 281,000 tons in 2001; thus increasing its production 43 times in around 30 years. Nowadays, its annual production falls around 350,000 tons per year and it is the leader in production in Spain, having gone from having 86% of state production in its hands at the beginning of the twenty-first century to 97%.

in 2023.
The lack of rainfall, overexploitation, and the existence of a large number of illegal wells means that the entire area faces a severe drought. This situation particularly affects the Doñana Natural Park, considered the lung of this entire region, and its aquifers.

Doñana is a protected natural area, located in the Andalusian provinces of Huelva, Cádiz, and Sevilla with an area of about 50,000 hectares, that harbours enormous biodiversity.[18] This natural park has become a battlefield for its most precious asset, water. But if water continues to be drained from the aquifer at this volume (it is estimated that there are about 1,000 illegal wells in the area) in the future, there will be no natural park or agriculture possible. Furthermore, Doñana faces not only a problem of quantity but also a problem of quality of its water; agrochemical discharges from irrigation have already begun to change its ecosystem. Scientists and environmentalists demand a hydraulic plan from the authorities that allows, as the only future solution, long-term socioeconomic development while preserving and enhancing ecosystems of great environmental value.

The politician Teresa Rodríguez, leader of Adelante Andalucía, one of the Andalusian left-wing parties, denounced in Brussels the lack of will of some political parties to seek solutions to the water problem and to refuse the demands of the economic sector. Among these parties, Partido Popular, an extreme-right political party which won the last national election, has promised to legalise 1460 hectares of illegal

Flamingos in Doñana Park (Alamy picture, traveler.es, 2019)

cultivation. Teresa highlighted the need for a forward-looking plan that reorganises the agriculture sector of the area, including the closing of illegal wells, arguing:

"The next generation of Huelva residents will never be able to irrigate. I don't know, they will eat the money that previous generations accumulated. It is necessary to ask them for co-responsibility".[19]

Act IV. The organisation "Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha".

"Because we have been suffering for decades being tamped down by those who are supposed to ensure our integrity, our dignity, and our labour rights. We were already tired of seeing the same thing. And despite the fear of showing our face and being out of work, we decided to move forward because if no one did anything for us, we would have to stand up for ourselves."

(Verónica Domínguez, member of JHL at the Conferences "The Syndicalist Feminism to Come", Reina Sofía Museum, 2021)

Understanding that politicians, trade unions and agriculture companies are involved in maintaining this corrupt system through their acts or omissions, many workers have started organising themselves. Within this context, the organisation Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha[20] was born in 2018 by women day labourers in order to defend their labour rights and to achieve sustainable working and living conditions. These

women work and live in the province of Huelva. Some of them are Spanish, and others are immigrants, coming from Eastern Europe or Africa, specifically from Morocco. They define their syndicalist job as feminist,[21] antiracist,[22] and environmentalist.[23]

Aware that their situation is not determined only by labour issues but also by social problems, such as class, racism, and gender inequality, as well as over-exploitation through capitalist systems, they carry out different actions to advocate for working rights and better life conditions. These women give information about labour rights to workers, denounce situations of irregularity, organise demonstrations, create open communication channels with the government, trade unions, and employers, carry out public awareness campaigns about the products we eat, participate in organising conferences, and speak to the press and different media.

These workers know that their problems are not solved individually, so they work through a social network as relational subjects. Firstly, amongst themselves, from the workers who give information about what is happening in the fields, to those who work directly in the organisation carrying out the necessary actions, to larger social organisations from which they obtain information and help. At the same time, they are aware that this is a global problem, therefore, they also work together with collectives from other sectors such as sex workers, cleaners, caregivers, and miners, in order to strengthen the fight.

Act V. The consumers: a fundamental part of the consumption system.

The last fundamental character in this system is the consumer. In the end, all products on the market are made for us to consume. As consumers, we have rights that protect us from insecure, unhealthy products, bad practices, and protection related to payments, returns, and the use of products. With this in mind, I would like us to think about the idea of becoming responsible consumers, starting from our purchasing decisions, which include variables related to social and environmental rights.

Do not misunderstand me, I am aware that we cannot place the entire weight of responsibility on our individual shoulders, considering that it is necessary that all stakeholders involved in the production system should work together to ensure products are made under socially responsible practices.[24] The reality is even more challenging since we often face a lack of transparency in information about how companies operate, preventing us from making better informed choices and acting against these practices. As these authors highlight, a product that was produced violating human and working rights and is non-environmentally friendly should not be offered as a final product in the market. Despite this, these factors should not stop us from introducing practices into our daily lives, such as purchasing patterns, that promote other forms of production and protect fundamental rights.

In the case of strawberries, consuming local[25] and seasonal products can be a start. We need to

Members of Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha during a demonstration (ctxt, 2020)

consider that perhaps no country should be a global mass producer and exporter of strawberries, even less so in the way these practices are overseen today. Another option would be to only consume the fruit during its natural season, February-March and May-June.[26] This strategy is useful to support small local cooperatives that we know comply with environmental and working regulations. Eating locally is worth it in the long run because it offers better quality and fresher food, cares for the environment and local economy, allows us to know the origin of the products, and supports small businesses. As Teresa Rodríguez states:

"We need co-responsibility to continue working in the countryside. The agriculture sector will be a strategic field for humanity since we are going to a scenario of collapse and scarcity and difficulty in covering food sovereignty".

Furthermore, we owe protection and rights to the people who grow and collect the fruits that will later be on our table. The women who harvest strawberries in Huelva are 70% of the workforce and they put their bodies in extremely precarious situations so we can enjoy this fruit. In addition, the companions of the Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha organisation put their efforts into fighting for their working and living rights, and a fairer sustainable system. It is very likely that these women will not be hired to work again, as punishment for speaking out.

So, it is firstly necessary to boycott strawberry companies that are not socially and ecologically responsible, by not buying their products. Secondly,

Women day labourers harvesting the strawberry in Huelva (STEs-I, 2020)

demanding from the relevant authorities, governments, trade unions, and media, to make companies comply with laws, reporting them if necessary, and giving truthful information about the reality of the situation. Thirdly, it is necessary to claim fairer immigration laws that do not leave people in situations of precariousness and vulnerability. Laws that do not allow the criminalization of migrants leaving them adrift as currency to devalue the rights of all workers. Finally, we could support the struggle of these women either financially through crowdfunding, by sharing information that raises awareness of bad practices, or actively working alongside them.

told me that in Korea they were called 'western berries' when they were first introduced in the early 20th century under Japanese occupation. Since the 1990s, there has been debate between the countries around a variety of strawberry that the Japanese claim were copied from them, an argument that has been rehashed repeatedly.

Political actions[27] that favour the creation of more diverse and inclusive societies and that emerge from collectivity permit workers to have dignified lives and create a basis for more democratic societies. Moreover, Pastora Filigrana,[28] an Andalusian labour lawyer that works with JHL, argues that the capitalist system reinvents itself after each crisis and the anticapitalist

strategies that Western and white political classes have tried, have failed. Filigrana proposes that it is essential to start looking into the margins in a search for new forms of dissent that challenge the system itself and its scale of value. The syndicalist fight of the collective Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha is based not only on gaining working rights but also on advancing the sustainability of all lives and questioning the production system itself. Therefore, it is an excellent example for us to analyse and rethink the production system at large. In this regard, the statements of Ana Pinto and Verónica Sánchez (2021) of JHL about their position within the feminist (and anti-capitalist) struggle ring true:

"I think this struggle (...) is true feminism because the feminism that everybody talks about does not represent me. (...) I do not feel identified with a woman from Madrid who is trying to break the glass ceiling. What I have on top of my head is the plastic of a greenhouse, and nobody is talking about what is happening to us. (...)"

If breaking the glass ceiling does not protect all bodies and the rights of all people, then it should not be the only ceiling that needs to be broken. It is a responsibility to break them all, especially if we want the strawberry process to be reversible and the strawberries to no longer be bitter.

1 Haraway, D. (1988) “Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective”. In this piece the author demands a practice of positioning that is about carefully attending to power relations at play in the processes of knowledge production.

2 The term political subject has been constructed through two concepts. First, the conceptualization of political action by Hannah Arendt (1958) understood as an active citizenship that engages in collective and civic deliberation about matters that affect a (political) community (three characteristics: the political realm is never individual, it is always collective; it happens in the public space; and entails action and speech in front of others as a collective dialogue). Second, the concept of parrhesia, coined by Foucault (2001), as a situation where a person tells the truth in a hazardous situation. Public denunciation through different mechanisms such as demonstrations, reports of labour irregularities, interviews with the press, and dialogue with politicians, from a marginal and discriminatory position, turns these women into political subjects. With their fight, these activists open up spaces for social and political dialogue that invite reflection on the consumer/capitalist system and human and labour rights, among others.

3 In southern Spain, the natural season of strawberries is from February-March to May-June. Nowadays, we have strawberries all year round (among other food products). This situation should make us think about how this is possible and what are the consequences.

4 La Fresa Amarga (2004) translated as The Bitter Strawberry is a book that delves into the situation of the strawberry in Huelva.

5 Moreno Nieto, J. (2012) professor at University of Cadiz specialised in economics, research group: work, politics, and gender.

6 Delgado cabeza, M. (1999) professor at the University of Seville specialised in applied economics of Andalusian agro-fishery sector.

7 Moreno Nieto, J. (2012)

8 Milán Fernández, M. (2021).

9 The situation of local people is far from ideal. The agriculture producer‘s non-compliance with the general agreement is widespread with daily wages, not paying overtime, confiscating foreign passports, making houses uninhabitable, etc.

10 Moreno Nieto, J. (2012)

11 The worst aspect of this hiring model is that it is endorsed by employers, the central and regional government, and the large trade unions. (La fresa amarga, 2004)

12 Milán Fernández, M. (2021) lawyer and general director (until 2022) of the feminist online space Women’s Rights by Women’s Fight.

13 The change in Spain (and Europe) towards more restrictive immigration laws has a direct impact on the deregulation, criminalization and loss of rights of migrants (with and without papers). These laws lead to the routine violation of migrants’ rights in transit, at international borders, and in the countries they migrate to.

14 The collective agreement obliges farmers to provide decent houses for seasonal workers. More often than not the houses provided do not meet habitability regulations; Seasonal workers are forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.

15 This name is a pseudonym to protect her, so she can continue working; since people who report injustices are penalised, and because she is an

undocumented person who could be deported.

16 70% of the labour force that harvests strawberries are women.

17 Huelva belongs to the autonomous community of Andalusia. Historically, the entire region has suffered water restrictions due to a lack of precipitation. In recent decades, this situation has worsened due to the increase in irrigated agriculture and a growing decrease in rainfall.

18 Sanchís, A. (2023) journalist.

19 Carne Cruda podcast (2023).

20 For a more in-depth analysis of the role of these women as political subjects, you can consult my thesis: "Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha Collective: A political analysis from a gender perspective of the emergence of women activists as political subjects" (2021, Utrecht University).

21 Feminist because they are aware that they work in a highly feminised sector. Ana Pinto, spokeswoman of the organisation (Borrego and Báez, 2020), stated how in recent years, more women than men have been hired in the red fruit sector because women are in a more vulnerable and precarious situation and it is therefore easier to exploit them. At the same time, the large trade unions have neglected the more feminised labour sectors and have not addressed their specific needs and issues.

22 Antiracist because the situation of immigrant workers is even worse than for locals, as explained previously. This collective of women, both local and foreign, are conscious that to solve their working issues all workers need to have the same rights and protection from the law. It is in this view that they also demand a change in the migration law.

23 Environmental because the intensive farming in Huelva, characterised by overexploitation and illegal extraction of water, is putting the aquifers of the area in danger. Therefore, they demand an agro-ecological model that respects both the environment and people.

24 Toussaint, M., Cabanelas, P. and González-Álvarado, T. (2020) European research.

25 A problem related to this is that there is no officially agreed-upon distance for what constitutes eating 'locally'. Being able to eat locally depends on the production ability of your area. There are regions with high agricultural productivity and areas with limited options. These differences need to be addressed (Kileen, 2017).

26 In Spain.

27 Butler, J. (2020) philosopher and gender studies scholar.

28 Filigrana García, P. (2020). Pastora is a labour lawyer, trade unionist, feminist, columnist and human rights activist of a Romani origin (mix-race Romani and white).

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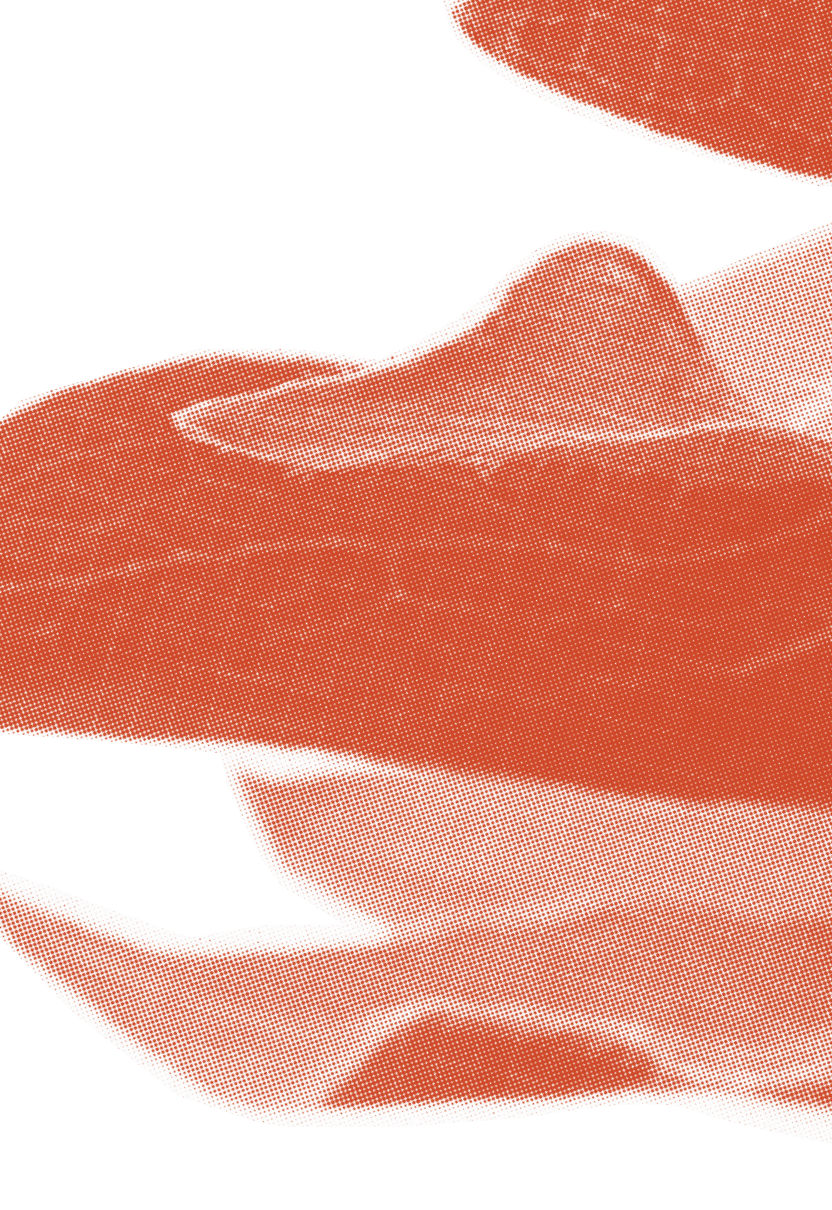

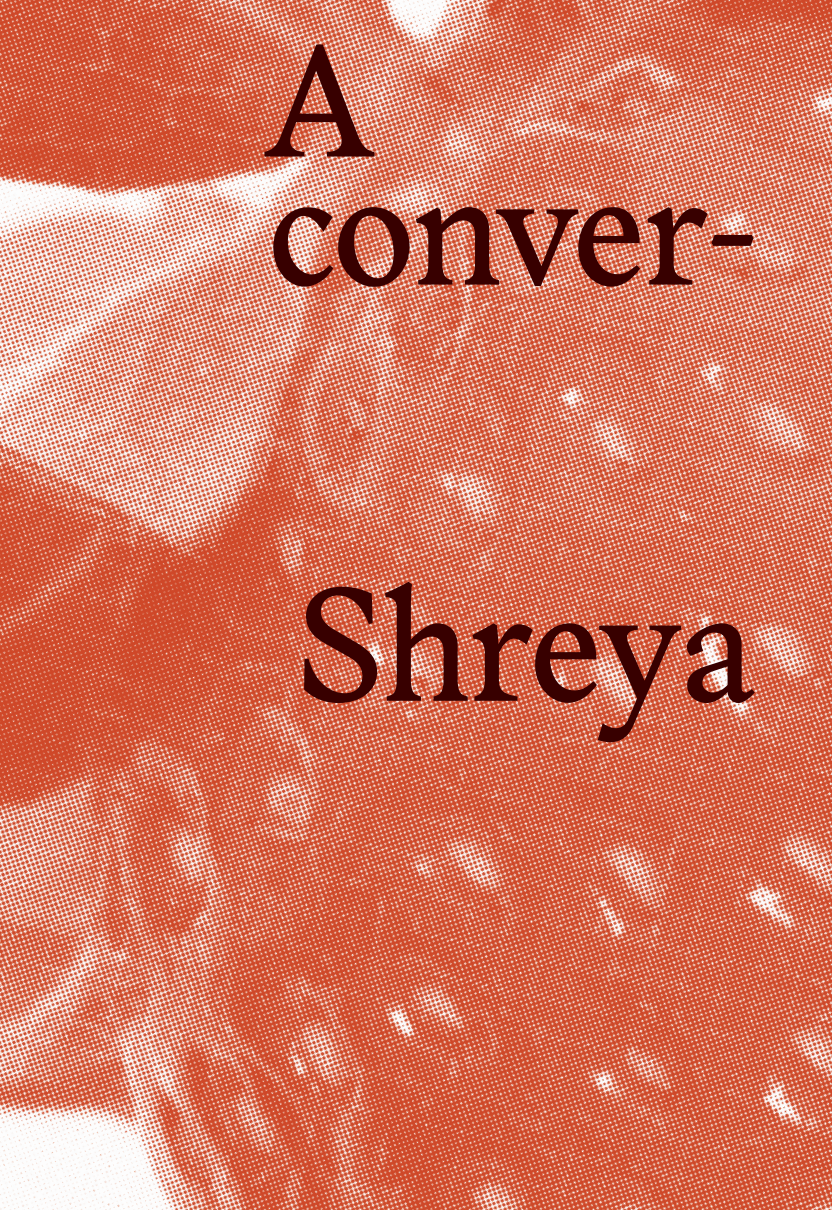
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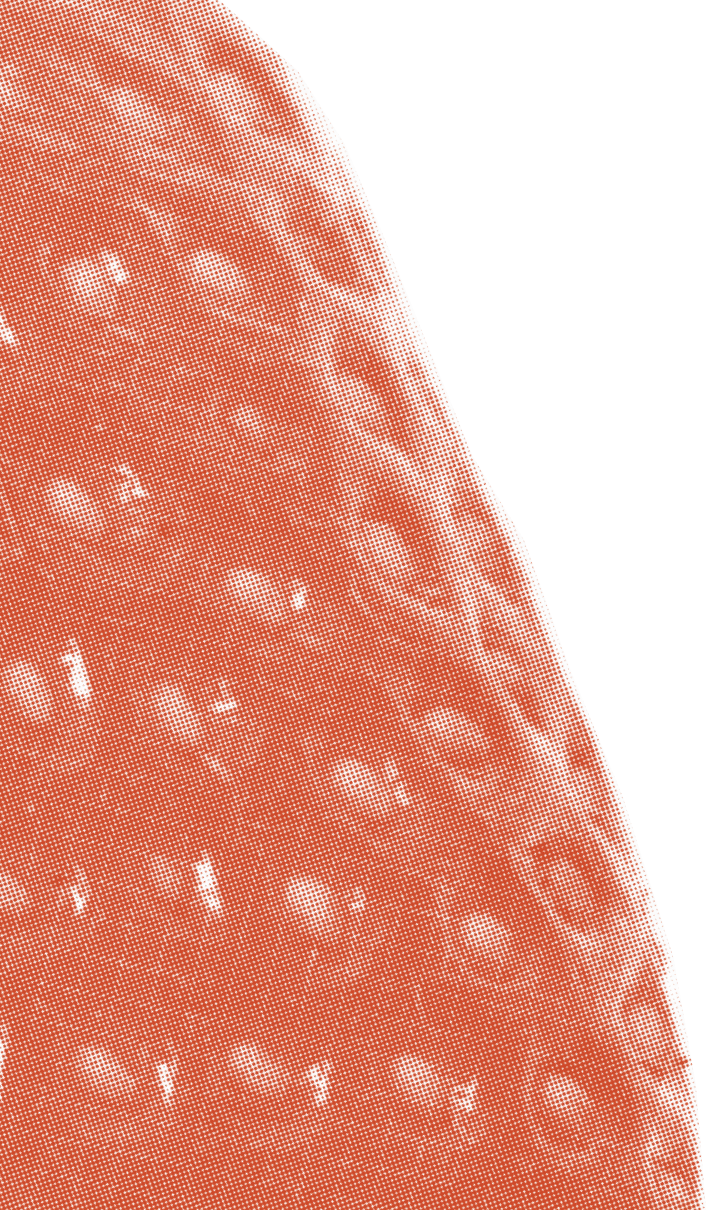


In the midst of writing this publication, I hosted a writing workshop along with HumDrumPress to share my strawberry research and facilitate a writing session.[1] There, I met Shreya, one of the guests in attendance who came out of curiosity. Her knowledge and perspective in the story of the strawberry expanded the scope of this research even further. Following the session, we exchanged contacts and made plans to talk more. We met a few weeks later at a market in Delft. There, we spoke over some ice cream.

M: Can we start with an introduction and can you speak a little about what you do within your research?

S: I am a PhD researcher in Hamburg. I mainly look at how identity shapes people's behaviour during and after conflict. I base that off of the way in which behaviour is shaped in relation to the law or legal frameworks. I look at international laws ranging from human rights laws to humanitarian law, and laws of transitional justice like amnesties etc. My main interest area in a more broad sense is the intersection between law and psychology, to see what kind of psychological forces, implications or biases play into the ways in which the law is seen, interpreted, used, and performed.

M: So, you use a lot of references from psychology theory to build into your arguments?

S: Exactly. I'm a psychologist and a lawyer by training. I have a master's in forensic psychology as well so I'm able to draw on ideas from psychology, like you said, and link it to ideas

within legal frameworks. A lot of the time I feel like lawyers do have a pretty positivistic understanding of how the law works. I think it's really interesting to see how that positivistic interpretation is still based on so many heuristics and biases, such as expressions of where one is from and how one thinks, and I'm really interested in the dynamic of that.

M: Now I wish I was a bit more prepared in finding laws related to strawberries, but I guess the fact is that a lot of the people who pick the strawberries are doing so whilst undocumented and usually in countries that they are not originally from and therefore have a very precarious position. I remember reading a story in 2020 about how Italian farmers were given extra money so that they could document their labourers and therefore build on a more ethical practice.[2] However, in 2020 when the pandemic hit, a lot of Italian workers had to leave their office jobs so many of them went to work in agriculture. The farmers then had to pay the Italian workers a fair wage of course, so all these undocumented migrant workers were pushed to the side. They didn't have as much work and were still in precarious conditions.

S: It is really complex as an issue. To think in just legal terms, countries have two,sometimes conflicting, duties. One is a duty of care towards their citizens, and one is a duty of

care towards refugees and migrants. Oftentimes, undocumented labourers arrive at a place because of trafficking or smuggling. This is really complex because we often see undocumented labourers as slightly unidimensional. We see them as lacking in documents, but that's not really the root of the problem. The root of the problem is that they lack an identity of their own or a place where they are able to have claims with the state. Being a citizen of a country allows you so many different rights, such as the right to return, the right to work, and, in a lot of cases, these are given to citizens or documented labourers. And what that means is that the lack of documentation actually is a problem that is pervasive, not just to one's ability to work or one's status legally, but it extends to so many other spheres, such as social integration or political expression. In some cases, labourers or migrants may arrive from a third country into the country where they're currently working of their own free will, and in other situations they may be coerced or forced into arriving in a third country and lack the means, the possibility, the resources or information to head back. There's also the added dimension of how consensual the labour that is being extracted from them is. Even aside from the economic dimension of it, just the fact that they may not have even chosen to come into a third country, or this specific country, also makes the idea of undocumented labourers very

controversial and nuanced. With that said, I do think that this solution of providing a conglomerate or a corporation or even an individual with money to change the documentation type of an individual labourer is a concerning strategy. It seems to have this approach of throwing money at a multi-layered problem. And once this documentation does fall in place, if it does, ever, which itself is not certain, what happens then? Once this documentation is made, what kind of access to resources do these people have? Because their origin continues to remain irregular. For example, there was recently a bill in the UK, which states that if you have used any irregular means to enter the country, then your stay in the country is automatically deemed irregular.

M: But then, the state also defines what is a 'regular' or 'irregular' way to enter the country?

S: Exactly. And often, this simply means, like I said before, the smuggling or trafficking of individuals, of human beings. And when you have laws such as this, the definition of undocumented itself becomes very variable and changes for each country. I would say, for example, in Italy, the case is, if you don't have a visa, or a refugee visa, you are undocumented.

But in the UK, you may have a visa, which may still be declared irregular if you haven't entered the country through the means

specified by the government. This is still at an uncertain point....[3]

M: But it's really fascinating. I mean, I think also what you were saying, too, that a lot of the people being coerced into coming to a country come in with a different expectation in mind. I was reading about the conditions for mostly Mexican workers coming to California, and they'll have some kind of arrangement with the farmer where they'll have housing or accommodation that is offered to them, which is actually not very comfortable, and it's usually beside the fields where they are spraying pesticides and insecticides.[4] So then they actually often develop a lot of health problems. They don't have access to any kind of translation or transportation to visit a doctor and get health problems taken care of. And then whatever kind of money they make will sometimes be docked as a rental fee for their homes. So even though, say, in coming to this country to work, they will get X many dollars to be able to support their families back home, in reality, they end up being in debt most of the time.

S: It really does remind me of plantation workers. There's this really interesting book called *Red Tea*.[5] It's a brilliant book about plantation workers in India and how they were maintained in this constant state of debt. It creates a situation where you can never leave, right? And given that there's so much literature on

plantation workers and how that's akin to slavery or is sometimes direct slavery itself, it's actually alarming that that practice continues to exist now in almost the same form with almost no discourse around its similarities to slavery.

M: Well, that's also why I'm really into this term that Haraway and Tsing came up with of the "plantationocene", essentially a term that views the Anthropocene through the plantation. Because there's so many links to also how the word colonisation comes from the latin *colon*, which means "to cultivate". So this idea of tilling the land or making the land "useful" is so connected to colonial values and, therefore, the plantation as a structure that is literally planting people in a place. Crazy to consider that it's still a thing that is happening in such modern and invisible ways today.

S: Scary.

M: Yeah.

...

M: We can jump into some of the questions leftover from the writing workshop to see if anything still resonates. A lot of the things I'm curious to explore in this strawberry research surrounds the questions: "How do we tell a story that belongs to everyone?" and "How do we form stories that are built on memory?" Maybe this is interesting for you in thinking about the ways that laws are formed from tradition.

S: Actually, this is really interesting. I was just this morning reading about how memory is based on frames, cultural, historical frames. And if you've heard of the framing effect, essentially, these frames already exclude certain pieces of information. And the stronger they are, the more they affect your memory, and the more your memory is basically curated into this very selective, specific set of ideas that maybe differs entirely from reality.

I would really recommend this book called *Frames of Remembrance*.[6] It's really interesting. It talks about this idea of collective memory being so diverse because of the frames that each individual inherits, yet which at the same time, exist in a collective form, even in their diversity. Because there are some frames that are pushed by governments or agents of authority or media. Those frames essentially dictate what people remember and also dictate what kind of laws are going to be made.

At the end of the day I think there are very few legislatures in the world that adequately research a problem before coming up with the law. Most of it is really based on social media or protests or, you know, very random public opinion, and public opinion is spurred by the framing of an issue that we inherit from our collective memories. So really the legislature is just basing many of its decisions across the world on this idea, on this collective memory.

M: I think the reason why I also bring up collective memory is because the strawberry

is this symbol that, from my context as being somebody from North America, is just a seasonal thing. It's a very cute, childish thing as well (and I see the image of the strawberries on a lot of children's clothing, too), so it brings this sense of purity and nostalgia and that tracks back even to monks painting strawberries in the bible. You will see images of the strawberry in paintings with the Madonna because it has this kind of connection to purity and sweetness and virginity, it's this red fruit that comes from a white flower. It's very intimate but also cute. So then how do we unravel this relationship that we have already established as innocent and sweet with something that is connected to exploitation and violence?

I think I'm trying to make the strawberry a radical symbol. To instead think about how the strawberry can be this symbol of change, of changing our expectations of what something brings us.

S: I think that's very fair actually. I mean, going back to this idea of collective memory and linking it with what you just said, because oftentimes human beings as a collective try to, or not really 'try', per se, but our memory works in such a way that it excludes the violent, the traumatic, the problematic. As a society, oftentimes we work towards minimising dissonance and whitewashing a lot of the problematic aspects. I do think that the story of how the

strawberry is associated with purity while also being cultivated in violent ways just ties back to that perfectly, right? Because you're able to enjoy the purity of something without the dissonance associated with the exploitation of the production of it. I think if society as a whole had a perfect memory, maybe strawberries would be less popular than they are right now.

M: Yeah, but I also think, from that perspective most things would be unpopular because the production of a lot of things is exploitative. Sugar production has a violent history, avocado production in Mexico is often taxed by cartels,[7] and bananas have a history of workers' strikes and massacres—it's wild when you start to unpick it, and maybe we would all starve if we thought this way. But maybe there's some kind of way that these realities can be present in our consciousness.

S: I think in this sense storytelling is really important. I think it was shown in some studies that human beings are often unable to properly conceptualise large numbers. The difference between a hundred and a thousand doesn't seem as striking as it actually is in numbers. It's the case of, would you choose to save 400 people in a camp of a thousand or would you choose to save 400 people in a camp of a 500, right—like, it's the same sort of irrationality in thinking that saving 400 people out of 500 is better than, you know 400 out of 1000 because,

Don Frutero
STRAWBERRIES
400g

Don Frutero
STRAWBERRIES
400g
Don Frutero
STRAWBERRIES
400g

I don't know, the human mind often is unable to process this large number data. So I think when we have these discussions it's often about worker rights or immigrant rights or the rights of indentured labourers. And then it becomes a collective. Maybe then it's harder to track the story.

I remember some years ago when the Mediterranean refugee crisis was at its peak, there was this picture of a child who was attempting to cross the mediterranean and had died in passage. It evoked so much international attention and subsequent funding for the appropriate organisations, which then dipped in popularity with the picture itself. The refugee crisis was going on long before and after this image, and the numbers were there to speak of it, but the story is what captured the urgency.

M: That's interesting, because I think it's not very often that we have one sole figure that is really representing workers rights in these kind of places, and when there is some kind of hero to the story—albeit, a very patriarchal understanding of how a story can be told—it becomes something that resonates with a lot of people.

S: And that said, I think collective storytelling, in a non-patriarchal, more collective way is also so important. I'm not sure about strawberry cultivation specifically, but I do know that in many plantations in India, with pre-independence, these oral histories and shared, improvised

stories essentially gave a way for people in those plantations to have a voice and something to share with the next generation. Now that those plantations are way less present, it gives us a way to look at experiences without using our own subjective perspective.

Of course this is not a solution giving session but I'm just thinking about how that could work in the case of hearing people within the strawberry system whose stories are being told, and how we could form collective and non-exclusionary systems of storytelling—and also how that then goes on to impact the law or policy?

M: Well it's interesting because it's also an industry that exists in so many different countries, but then there's so much separation between them all, specifically separation with language.

Somebody else is writing an article for the strawberry book. Her name is Patricia Diz Neira, and she was specifically writing about a group of women activists in the south of Spain who are working with strawberry labourers there to help women with access and legal rights and have their stories be shared. But then, of course, that kind of research reaches its own limitations because it's only communicated in Spanish.

And then there's also situations that are happening across Italy, Greece, and North America. So is there a way that we can imagine collectivity through this scope

as well? Or is it also the job of the worker to oversee this kind of advocacy?

S: That's an unfair burden, I think.

M: Yeah. Exactly.

S: So I have a background working with indigenous populations on legal and educational issues, and one thing that I can kind of extrapolate is, when we expect advocacy from an already marginalised population, it often backfires. It backfires into placing even more expectation on the maginalised to solve their own situation. And it can often start from a really inclusive and positive space, but when it goes out into the world, it ends up being misused by people saying, "you should have advocated for yourself", when really they're the ones perpetuating the cycles of abuse.

I think it's important to give people space as opposed to making it a responsibility, and also acknowledge choice when people choose not to contribute to that story.

Again, I'm not an expert in strawberries, but I have seen a lot of people who have gone through some pretty traumatic experiences in their life, sometimes in plantations and sometimes in other jobs, kiln working, brick working, etc. And I have seen that some people are really eager to talk about their rights and talk about what that felt like and what landed them in that position. And others want to distance themselves from that. And that's fair, you know, that's fine, too.

So I guess it's a balance between providing people with space and encouragement and truly listening when people do choose to share, and making it as non-judgmental as possible. Because, for example, if you were interviewing a strawberry farmer or somebody who is an indentured labourer, and they came to you and say "I didn't have the capacity to get a visa", for example, and "I wanted a better life and I migrated illegally", it's important to then not be judgmental about it. Because that is a process, and people choose to do things for a variety of reasons. And sometimes those reasons are the same part of the oppressive system that they're facing within the industry itself, right? So I guess it's very important to acknowledge choice and also give space that's non-judgmental.

M: Maybe to go back to storytelling, because I imagine a lot of the people who read this book aren't working on strawberry fields. I'm wondering how the strawberry consumer can change their own stories to include the many voices, or the many hands that are involved?

S: Since coming to the workshop, I feel like I have started looking at it differently, not just at strawberries specifically, but at consumerism in general. I actually went vegan five years ago for similar reasons and I now find myself often passing grocery store aisles and really considering *who produced this, and why?* And sometimes it's not just a matter of

consumption, right? It's also, if we choose not to buy these strawberries because we don't like how they're produced, where are these workers going back to? Because returning home might not even be a possibility for a lot of people. So I think just cutting off consumption is not the response either.

But through your book, I think it would be really important, or at least I would find it really interesting, if you gave me suggestions on lines of thought. To think about a memory and then colour it in context and space, and then expand that context and space to also include the production.

M: I think sometimes just having that kind of knowledge or connection to something changes the way that you can look at it. I think a lot about how the world is also an intense place at this moment. In Europe, we have so many farmer strikes that are going on, and agriculture and the environment is consistently a big question. So maybe knowing a bit more about what goes on in the production chain helps you with making more educated decisions when moving forward. But, yeah, it's hard to say how to make a more radical and transformative future.

S: What you just said, having a radical future that is transformatory is important, the other suggestion I would say is to look at it in a progressive continuum and take acknowledgement as a win. I think if somebody is able to look at this

book and acknowledge the complexity and still make no changes otherwise, I think that's still important. That still allows for growth in other respects.

M: I think it is also about sharing a much more layered context that we're all actively involved in. I am also questioning *how to restructure a story that belongs to everyone?*

This is a quote I really, really love. It's from Erin Manning. She's a researcher based in Canada, and works a lot in the research fields of ecology and pedagogy, but also works with a specific interest in neurodiversity studies. A really fascinating woman. But from her book *Out of the Clear,*[8] she wrote this on encounters:

"So because to live in the encounter, to allow oneself to be changed by it is to be continuously undone and to be sensitive to all that comes alive in that undoing."

So I think with this, what comes up for me is, it's in knowing what is already involved in your own situation or context, that the encounter presents itself, and then you can be changed by it.

S: That you're able to respond to it instead of reacting.

M: Yeah.

S: It actually reminds me of *My Grandmother's Hands.*[9]

M: From Resmaa Menakem? I have not read it yet, but I know of it.

S: Yes, I would really recommend it, it reminds me of the idea that there is an inherent fear response from so much trauma that we've inherited, and that there's trauma because of abuse and exploitation is obviously true, but it goes both ways. The exploitative system exploits the exploiter and the exploited. And I think this kind of quote really brings to me the idea that you need to be aware of your context and the things that put you together in order to get rid of that fear response, in order to digest it or metabolise it. To take in new materials or experiences, and to digest and metabolise.

M: I feel that it's also about our own awareness of our abilities to act on something, to use our contexts as a way to understand the many ways we are connected.

S: And to accept it. Instead of challenging it.

1 A warm thank you to my publishers, Amy Gowen and Wibke Bramesfeld, for all their care and help in the production of this book. The writing workshop, *The Single and Available Strawberry*, was hosted at TENT Rotterdam, February 17th, 2024.

2 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/24/world/europe/italy-farms-coronavirus.html (online. Accessed 2022.)

3 https://ukandeu.ac.uk/explainers/illegal-migration-act-2023/ (online. Accessed 2024.)

4 Saxton, Dvera I. *The Devil's Fruit: Farmworkers, Health and Environmental Justice*. Medical Anthropology. New Brunswick (N.J.): Rutgers University press, 2021. Dvera Saxton activist and ethnographic work focuses on Mexican communities of labourers working in California.

5 Mezeske, Meg. *Red Tea*. Oklahoma City: City Owl Press, 2018.

6 Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona. *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. New Brunswick: Transaction publishers, 2008.

7 https://www.npr.org/2022/02/19/1081948884/mexican-drug-cartels-are-getting-into-the-avocado-and-lime-business (online. Accessed 2024.)

8 Manning, Erin. *Out of the Clear*. S.l.: Minor Compositions, 2023.

9 Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. London: Penguin Books, 2021.

Mimicry:

repro-
and

duction
replication

of
sweetness

I think about *why* the strawberry—and when I reflect on this, memories of mimicry come to mind. First being my grandmother, who I didn't really get to know so well. I was 3 when she passed, but I remember that she used to give me candy, specifically flavoured marshmallows. My mom told me that the strawberry marshmallows were her favourite, and as a kid, I would always add them to my brown bag of 5 cent candies at the corner shop. Not particularly because they were my favourites, but because they were hers.

The other memory is of my father and his preference for strawberry ice cream. I remember this clearly because of the ways his masculinity felt queered to me every time I saw him with a pink scoop. As a man opposing what he claimed as 'liberal politics' of gender identities and queer spaces—as a man who would never wear pink, and would refer to pink as "salmon", this sweet image of him with a bright pink substance so close to his face would instil in me some hope (yes—as I write this, I also struggle to place this kind of logic with colours—of colours being gendered, of colours bringing forth queer hope, but I find a sweetness that can only be linked to joy in this image. For the joy I have of another way of thinking for him to become possible.)

In these mimicries, I have my most personal memories with the strawberry—and perhaps because of this evasiveness, the strawberry does become abstracted into a object for joy, for family, for childhood when things didn't feel bleak but rather you could stumble upon the strawberry almost anywhere and its bright red skin could make you feel a warmth of security. Simply through its presence it brings a sweetness in memory for so many, something that in today's moment of climate devastation should bring about a certain feeling of relief. However it's presence is not always by chance. Before this strawberry made its way into our hands, it passed through many other

hands: in shipping, packing, picking, planting. Even before its growth, the ideal strawberry is something that has been negotiated by many others. With new varieties being introduced each season, scientists are trying to find ways to develop strawberries that can survive the upcoming droughts of climate change. American strawberry producer Driscoll is working with such scientists to prepare for this future.[1] They are picking strawberries found along the sides of highways and in the parking lots of Burger King's to seek out a future strawberry. Researchers believe that these strawberries could hold a key to survival in dire circumstances. A new strawberry is therefore bred. The taste doesn't quite match up and the skin is too seedy, but its story of survival can tell us something.

In art school, I started out as a painter. I understand now that this was because I grew up in a smaller town and went to a high school with little resources for other kinds of making. Drawing and painting were therefore the mediums of choice. At university, I was astonished that people had ceramics and printmaking in their high schools. I continued with painting, struggling to figure out what it was about this medium that worked for me while crits which fixated on colour, form, tone all cut up my work with myself left to wonder what made this abstract piece better or worse than the last one. Things clicked for me when I switched to sculpture. The physical space something took up gave me a better understanding of what I wanted to achieve with feelings of precarity and suspension. I found my language.

Mold making soon became a familiar practice as my obsession with perfection in shape and form took hold. I was enamoured by the possibility of something liquid taking solid form in whatever you mold in your hand to hold its shape. Carrots, coins, dried fish (this one was stinky and I don't recommend it unless you have forgiving studio mates), whatever

was at hand would become doubled, tripled, quadrupled. I could keep pouring and casting into infinity or at least until I wore the mold out, causing rips in the silicone. I began to be obsessed with its traits that signified perfection: smooth surfaces, no bubbles, edges of the seam that remained almost invisible. A truly successful cast would hold no presence of the hand that made it. It would be like it had just appeared. *"Oh for me? You shouldn't have."*[2] The practice grew to be expensive and I started to consider its effects in the long term. Silicone is a material that will not break down easily. Thinking of my failed molds somewhere on a trash barge, surrounded by all the plastics and toxic matter that would also not break down, I packed up my materials in a cardboard box, stored them under the stairs of my parent's house, and left to build my practice in another way.

told me a story about picking strawberries as a child in the countryside of Poland. She was careful to make sure she picked the best berries and placed them in her bucket with caution so that they wouldn't be crushed before they made it to the seller. When she gave the berries over to the seller, the bucket was emptied with haste and rough handling. She saw her carefully selected strawberries get smushed with all the other picked berries.

When Silicone and I met again, it was as a gift from a friend. I was already fixated on the strawberry, building a text for a film to present with a collaborator, and the silicone came

at the right time for a reunion. We were making a 3D scanned film installation to explore sinkholes and glitches. Like the strawberry causing sinkholes in the soil,[3] the 3D scanning would result in breakages at times. Little moments not caught by the camera would instead appear void, breaking connections in the soil to appear like ruptures. As a way of thinking with, I built a mold for the strawberry, letting my old ways of making return to me in the studio once more. Mask on, invisible fumes of green goo solidified overnight and captured the negative of the strawberry skin, seeds and all.

It was not a perfect mold by any means, I was out of practice. It revealed the hand. I casted hundreds of the strawberries, each holding almost similar errors of seams and bubbles. Its top never quite looked right either, but it was able to say something else that the strawberries in the stores could not: it was made from somebody, it was made by somebody. It was a product of people. Even with my own obsession in mind, a similar obsession to that of the farmers, who have their stores of quality, signifying the strawberry's successful looks through its firmness, colour, green crown, taste—the casted strawberry would reveal its artificiality—its made-ness. The strawberry in the plastic containers bought by shops would strain to hide its traces of production. Signifying its past with only a sticker signifying what country grew it. From there on, a concealed passage.

🍓 told me that in
China, the phrase
"planting strawberries"
was used to refer
to someone giving
another a hickey.[4]

1 https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2015-07-29/how-driscoll-s-is-hacking-the-strawberry-of-the-future? (online. Accessed 2021.)

2 Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Page 23. Penguin Ecology. London: Penguin Books, 2020.

3 Due to the over-watering that happens during cold seasons in Florida, a state rich in strawberry production, soils erode overtime and sinkholes occur in the areas around the fields. Water Connects Us All, accessed online September 2021, https://alldownstream.wordpress.com/2010/08/21/killer-strawberries-destroy-city

4 Other languages translate to "sucking kiss"

The and an Open

Single Available Straw-berry:

Book exercise

The Single and Available Strawberry

With the invitation from HumDrumPress to share and stimulate this research as part of a public moment, I hosted *The Single and Available* Strawberry, a writing workshop held at TENT Rotterdam, close to Valentine's Day 2024. The event was a way to hear from others about their own relations made with strawberries, and further dig into the many contexts at play in all of our stories.

Below is an invitation for you to do the same. Take approximately 5-10 minutes for each prompt, but feel free to dig in further. The following pages contain attendee, Katerina Sidorova's handwritten notes from the session. The pages that follow from there are blank for you to contribute your own strawberry stories.

Prompts

Conjure a memory of a strawberry. It can be as real, as representation, or as imaginary as you like: as a smell, a taste, an artificial example, an organic example.

Pick one memory.

- Sketch out the memory—who was there, what was the encounter?
- Using that same memory, think of the role of place in this encounter. Where was it? When was it? What does this place feel like to you? Familiar/unfamiliar? Domestic/urban? Positive/negative?

- Research for a short while—Google place, Google time. What else was happening here while you had this encounter. What was the larger context you were inhabiting?
- Zoom out—what do you think is happening in this place now? Who is there?
- Zoom *far* out—what does this place look like in 100 years? Are there still strawberries? With this prompt think about the timescales of non-humans in comparison to the very human lifespans of workers. Here, I'm also trying to trying to tap into the love and kinship which becomes active when we build relations and nurture respect with non-humans. Can we attune our own sense of time to that of a mountain? A lake? How about a strawberry?

2011

(1) First time seeing Strawberries in December, The Hague supermarket (All of course) 7 huge strawberries in a big plastic box, Snowwhite in a glass coffin really. Expensive too – 2.50 €, 250 mbles for 7 berries – no way, I frankly cannot afford it, neither I want to. Strawberry ~~are~~ is a summer child. Sweet and sour, abundant, slight hint of cow manure that my family would fertilize the flower beds with, arrows of garlic plant shooting ~~up~~ through the low berry bushes. Buckets of overripe violently red berries, with juice seeping through the red gauze. Bruised maybe, but alive, not this, sterile coffin in the morgue-like light of a supermarket.

(2) Finding oneself in a west-european supermarket as a new local, not just a tourist is supposed to be a dream come true for an East-European. Here I am, I've made it – the only one from my class, the only kid my age – I am a student in an art school, this super-market is my local, I wanted this. Slowly, with the time, the detachment with the physicality means of production of (food, clothes) everything

really will catch up with me.
What did I sacrifice coming here, how come do I feel like a grade B fruit. Just like the marketing of bad apples in the UK – „we are not so pretty, but cheap and good enough" little smart bad apple in a sterile new environment.

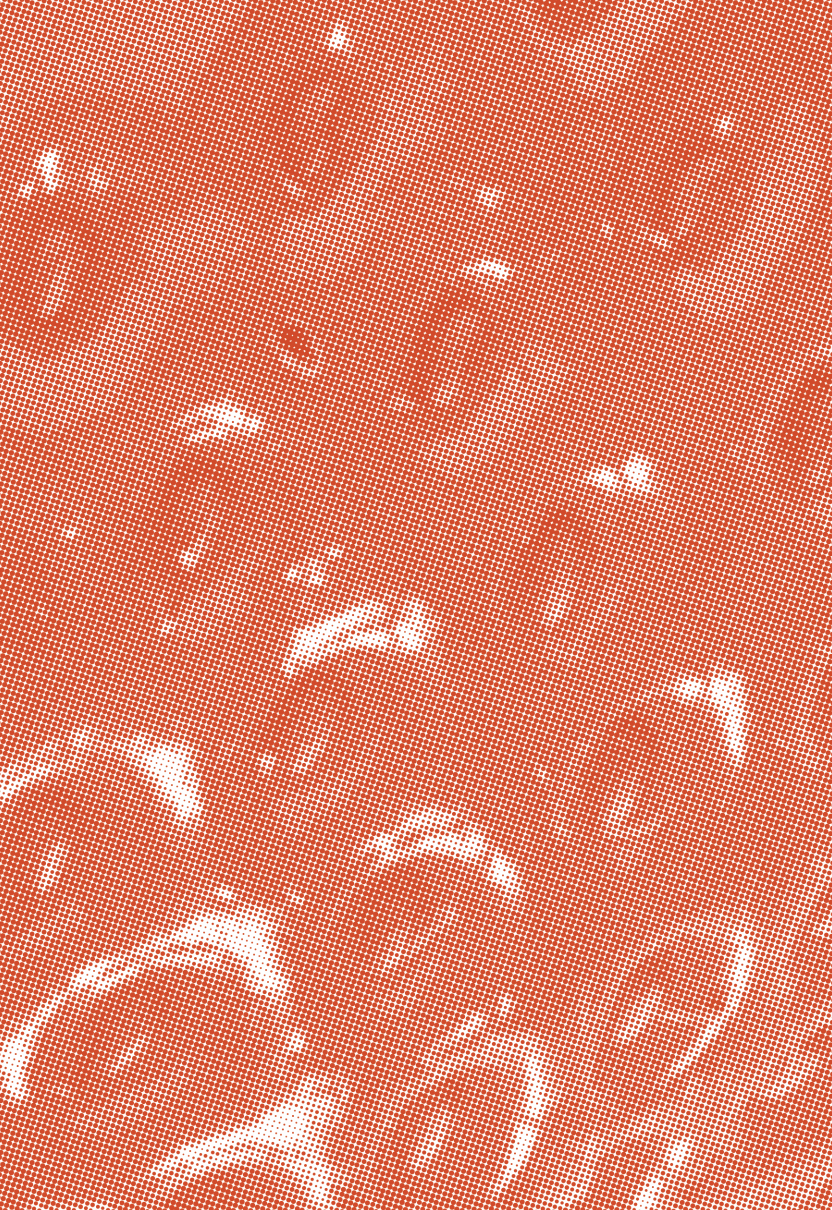
(3) In 2023 AH has announced it will stop flying fruit and vegetables, ~~to~~ sticking to train and see containers as the methods of transport. Hooray I guess? Another important line here is „in recent years, it has sold more than 40 m/h products, such as strawberries, from the NL itself in the summer season. Back to seasonal, huh?
When working at an organic vegetable market, I would often be asked whether the product is from NL. Odes and serenades being sung to the Dutch sweet strawberry, a national pride. The local, the homegrown. When asked, why the appeal, not once have I heard the environmentalist reasoning. It tastes better, it has a great smell, it's better, it's ~~to~~ ours. A cute little national treasure. Summer kings less from abroad please, there's enough strawberries here as is.

Continue with your own strawberry stories here....

Outro

The strawberry of the

at the end world

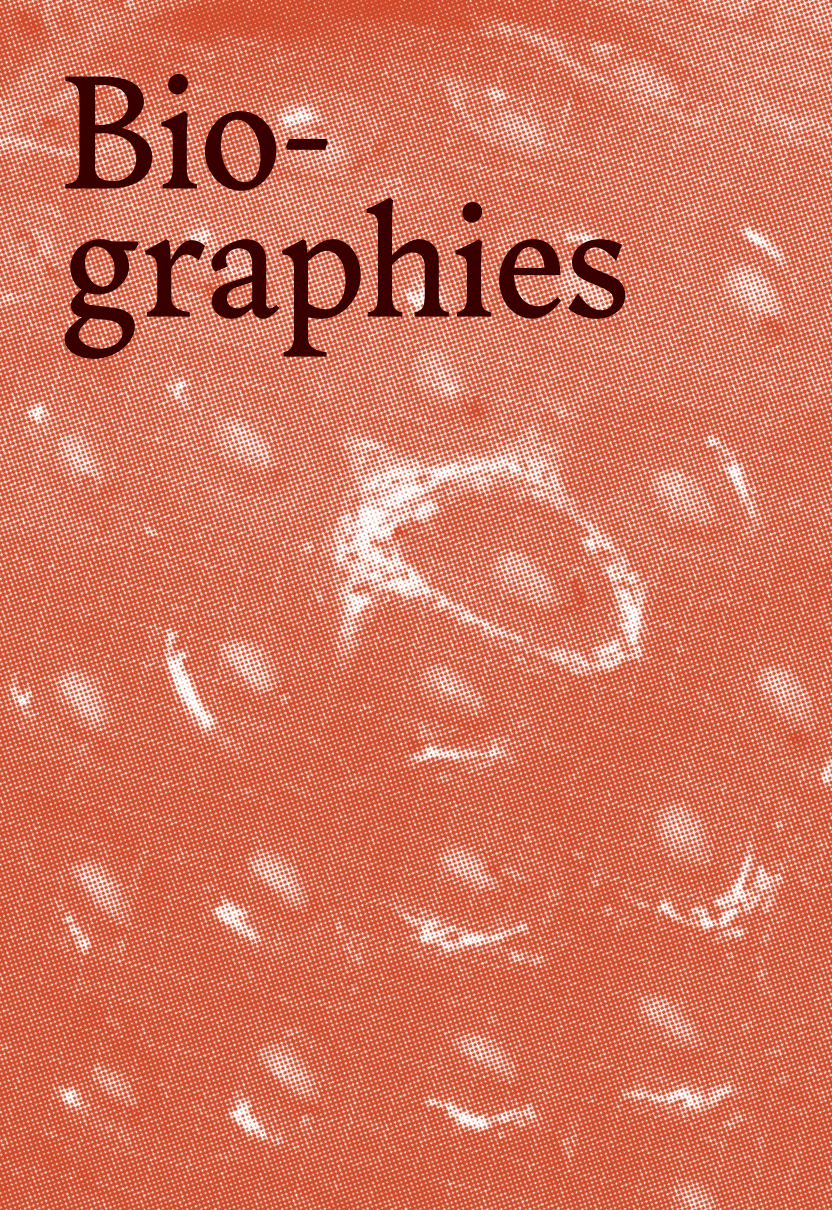


In our exit from the writing session, we reflected on our *far out* zooming that we had all been imagining, the "100 years from now" far out. Sharing around the room, we considered if we had imagined dystopian or utopian futures. Person to person, it varied to hear each's own closeness to the strawberry, relationships both skewed and distant. The human in all the stories was less defined, but what was really clear was that the strawberry would keep on growing. Contemplating Chernobyl-esque, nuclear and radioactive futures, everyone agreed that the strawberry would still be there. Unsure on its form, but knowing it would exist, with or without us, there would still be a strawberry at the end of the world.[1]

Through our varied contexts, the story of the strawberry lives on through our own hands and memories. From agricultural fields in Spain, to growing wild along highways, the strawberry will still persist amongst us. Wherever you encounter the strawberry next, I hope these stories help to shape your relation to it, and make you question its year-round presence in shiny, plastic containers on grocery shelves, or, even better, consider the many hands that have passed this fruit on to you. In the end, I remain hopeful that in reading these stories you are not turned off from eating strawberries, but rather, that you crave more, search more, question more. And maybe the next time you eat a strawberry, you'll remember its (his)stories once more.

1 An obvious call to Tsing. Who better to end a story with than a researcher who shows that non-human futures exist within the toxicity of life. Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* First paperback printing. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Bio-graphies



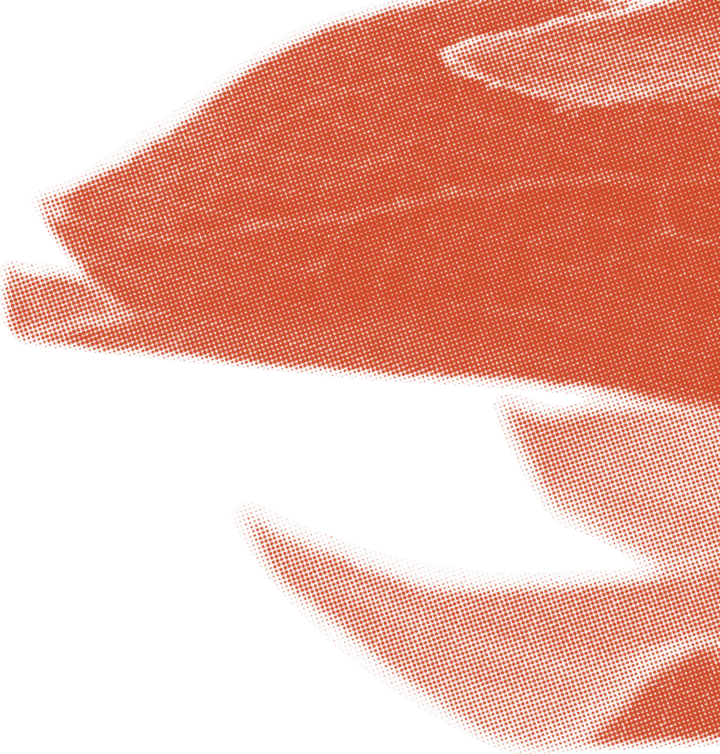
Patricia Diz Neira is a clinical psychologist originally from Vigo, Galiza. She specializes in psychosocial intervention in migrants and social minorities, with a strong background in therapy with vulnerable groups. Her research interests include migration, political theory, and intersectionality. In 2015, she published an article that analysed the migratory mourning of Spanish women who migrate to the Netherlands, entitled: "Being women and migrant before and now. Comparative analysis".

Currently, she lives in Rotterdam and has recently finished a Gender Studies MA (Utrecht University). Her final thesis explores, through a gender perspective and the theory of the political subject, the activist work of the Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha collective.

Shreya Shankar is currently a PhD researcher at Hamburg University, Germany. She has a background in public international law and forensic psychology. She is specifically interested in understanding the ways in which human emotion, cognition and identity interact with particular social and legal cultures. She has previously worked in the NGO space, on issues of indigenous peoples' rights, education and access to medical care, as a lawyer. She foregrounds individual experiences and stories in her interactions within this space in an attempt to democratise the process of constructing knowledge.

Marika Vandekraats (she/her) is an artist from the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Sə̓lílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, also known as Vancouver, Canada. Her research focuses on the human entanglements tied between nature and capital to frame extractivist processes that have irreversibly affected the climate. Her work takes shape through video, sculpture, text, and

performative installations that utilise archival research to challenge its context. Vandekraats regularly collaborates with friends in performance, video, and workshops to form solidarity and collective resistance against structures of oppression with the exaltation of friendship. Vandekraats has a MA in Art Praxis and Critical Theory from the Dutch Art Institute (2022, NL). She is currently based in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.



Colophon

The Colonial, Familiar, Nostalgic, Radical,
Transformative Life of the Strawberry

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The story of the strawberry is troubled.

Troubled because of what becomes uncovered as we unpick the systems within which this sweet, nostalgic fruit is embedded within. From rural English fruit-picking sites, to agricultural fields in Spain, to the sides of North American highways, the strawberry exists in many formations. Its multiple (his)stories—starting from its hybrid colonial roots, trace the many hands that have encountered this fruit on its journey into our mouths, its avid consumer.

The Colonial, Familiar, Nostalgic, Radical, Transformative Life of the Strawberry encompasses the stories and histories that shape the human relations that are entangled with the strawberry. It unpacks the abstractions between the fruit and the exploitation often overlooked within its production, to explore how, through varied social, political, geographic and economic contexts, the story of the strawberry lives on through all of our hands, mouths, and memories.

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